

**A grounded theory of inspirational coach-leadership**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to develop a grounded theory of the process of inspirational coach-leadership in sport. A Straussian grounded theory methodology was used. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with athletes (n = 22) and coaches (n = 15). Data were analysed through a process of open and axial coding, and theoretical integration. Through the process of analysis, data were broken down into smaller units (concepts), relationships between concepts were identified, and a substantive grounded theory was developed. The grounded theory of inspirational coach-leadership was built around the core category of ‘athlete(s) inspired through changed awareness of their capabilities.’ The core category was underpinned by three categories: (a) Establishment of mutual trust and respect with athletes, whereby coaches need to establish trust with athletes in order to inspire athletes; (b) conditions under which inspiration has the potential to occur, which highlighted that athletes are inspired in situations where they are vulnerable or ignorant regarding their potential; and (c) coach acts to change athlete’s awareness of their capabilities, which denotes the specific behaviours coaches should display to inspire athletes in such conditions. The theory also highlights that a range of contextual factors relating to the coach, athletes, and performance-environment interact to impact upon the process. The theory predicts that consistency between coach behaviour and the conditions in which inspiration can occur will lead to athlete-inspiration, but only if the coach has established a foundation of trust and respect with the athlete.

**Key Words:** Leadership, inspiration, awareness, trust, connection, coaching

## 1. Introduction

Inspiration is a motivational state that raises an individual's intentions regarding something of high intrinsic value (e.g., a vision of an ideal self) and motivates the individual to engage in efforts to achieve these intentions.<sup>1</sup> An episode of inspiration is characterised by evocation, where we attribute the experience of inspiration to an external stimuli (eg, somebody else); transcendence, whereby we gain awareness of new or better possibilities; and approach motivation, where we are compelled to invest effort to bring this new idea into fruition.<sup>2</sup> Put simply, inspiration is posited to serve as a mediator whereby intrinsically valued qualities evoked by an external stimuli (eg, people, ideas) induce inspiration, which, subsequently, motivates the individual to extend these qualities into a personally relevant context.<sup>3</sup> Research in social psychology has shown inspiration to be associated with performance-related variables (eg, enhanced efficiency and productivity),<sup>3</sup> improved well-being,<sup>4</sup> and positive emotions.<sup>2</sup> Given that this conceptualisation of inspiration is proposed to be applicable to any context<sup>1</sup>, and that anecdotal examples exist of teams being inspired to extraordinary achievements,<sup>5</sup> researchers have extended the construct of inspiration to sport, finding inspiration to be related to feelings of dominance and decreases in amotivation,<sup>6</sup> and higher levels of mental toughness.<sup>7</sup> As inspiration leads to such positive outcomes and is an experience that we cannot consciously control or evoke for ourselves,<sup>1</sup> understanding the sources of inspiration is important. However, limited research has explicitly explored the sources of inspiration.

One theoretical framework that has relevance for the concept of inspiration and sources of inspiration in a sporting context is transformational leadership (TFL) theory.

Transformational leaders are proposed to *inspire* followers to achieve exceptional outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

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To achieve this, transformational leaders are proposed to engage in four behaviours: idealised influence, where leaders enthuse pride in followers, set a good example for followers, and earn followers' respect by behaving in ways that maximise values; individualised consideration, where leaders display consideration for the unique needs and desires of each individual; intellectual stimulation, where leaders actively encourage followers to challenge commonly held assumptions about their work and be creative in producing solutions to problems; and inspirational motivation, where leaders develop, articulate and inspire others with their vision for the future.<sup>8</sup> Based upon this conceptualisation, intuitive links can be made between TFL and inspiration theory. For example, inspirational motivation would satisfy the transcendence characteristic of inspiration because leaders articulating an exciting vision of the future may make followers aware of better possibilities. Research in sport by Turnnidge and Côté<sup>9,10</sup> has further highlighted how coaches can show TFL behaviours to inspire followers (eg, by discussing goals and expectations). However, while TFL provides useful suggestions into how inspiration can be evoked by leaders, there are several theoretical issues with TFL that have been identified in contemporary reviews within organisational<sup>11</sup> and sport<sup>12</sup> literature. Specifically, these reviews propose that transformational leadership is a fuzzy construct that lacks a clear and consistent definition and underpinning theory that explains what transformational leadership is and how transformational leadership impacts on outcomes.<sup>11,12</sup>

The theoretical problems are highlighted by measurement issues, whereby research often finds consistently high intercorrelations between the proposed distinct dimensions of TFL, which does not support the proposed multidimensionality of TFL.<sup>11</sup> To explain this, Arthur, Bastardo, and Eklund<sup>12</sup> highlight that TFL uses tautological definitions, where

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transformational leaders are described based upon their impacts on followers, which prohibits transformational leadership being used as an independent variable in quantitative research. An example of this tautology is inspirational motivation. Specifically, inspiration is proposed to be a behaviour of transformational leadership. This is problematic because inspiration is a response not a stimulus (i.e., an outcome not a behaviour; cf.<sup>1</sup>). Consequently, Arthur et al. propose that transformational leadership theory is vague and does not outline how leaders are able to effect followers. Thus, van Knippenberg and Sitkin propose that research should use the central facets of transformational leadership theory to further our understanding of leadership. Given how central inspiration is to transformational leadership theory, and the positive influence inspiration has been shown to have on a range of outcomes (e.g., motivation, goal attainment, productivity, and wellbeing), research could use inspiration as its central focus to explore leadership in sport.

In light of the above critique, it is worth considering research that has explicitly examined inspirational leadership. Searle and Hanrahan<sup>13</sup> used semi-structured interviews to explore the practices of seven inspiring leaders from a range of contexts (eg, business). The findings suggested that leaders believed they could consciously inspire followers at the opportune moment, but in order for inspiration to happen there must be connection between the leaders and follower, and followers must be highly motivated towards the organisational cause. However, the findings provide limited detail surrounding the specific actions leaders engage in to inspire followers and the situations (ie, “opportune moments”) where leaders can inspire. Also, while the leaders were proposed to be inspiring, leaders may not understand how they inspired followers. Further, this research was not specifically conducted in sport.

To build on Searle and Hanrahan's work, Figgins, Smith, Sellars, Greenlees and Knight<sup>14</sup> investigated follower perceptions of inspirational leadership in sport, by interviewing 17 athletes' about their experiences of being inspired by coaches. The findings demonstrated that athletes were inspired in situations including those accompanied by negative cognitions and emotions (eg, following poor performance). In such situations, athletes reported being inspired by coaches' demonstrations of belief (eg, outlining their potential), showing the way forward (eg, providing technical information that enabled them to overcome a performance plateau), and exhibiting emotional support (eg, empathising with athletes). Further, Smith, Figgins, Jewiss and Kearney<sup>15</sup> used real-life footage (from the 1997 British and Irish Lions tour to South Africa) to explore how leaders communicate to inspire athletes. Amateur athletes viewed clips of leaders delivering speeches in different scenarios (eg, at half-time) and reported being inspired by leaders creating and enhancing belief and showing how the team can be successful, embracing and reinforcing the underdog status, creating feelings of pride in the team, empowering athletes to take responsibility, and expressing the challenges and rewards of success.

While such research enhances our understanding of how leaders inspire athletes, little is known about the factors (eg, personal and contextual factors) that impact upon a leader's ability to inspire athletes. Furthermore, although existing theories (ie, Transformational Leadership)<sup>8</sup> mention inspiration, researchers have yet to provide a theory that *explains* the process of inspirational leadership in sport.<sup>5</sup> Given that research has demonstrated inspiration to be positively related to performance-related variables and wellbeing, research is warranted to develop a theory of inspirational leadership in sport. Consequently, the aim of this study was to use a grounded theory methodology to explore the process through which coaches

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inspire athletes. Aligned with the critique of TFL, there are three specific reasons grounded theory is particularly useful for studying inspirational leadership. First, grounded theory is used to explore social processes involving interactions between participants and their social context, and theories of leadership consider the interactions between individuals (eg, leaders and followers) and the context in which these happen (for examples see ref. 6, 14). Second, grounded theory is useful when studying phenomenon where adequate theories do not exist for a specific population and to date a theory of leadership that explains the inspirational impact of leaders in sport does not yet exist.<sup>5</sup> Third, grounded theory can be used where existing theories are underdeveloped,<sup>17,18</sup> which is the case within this area as current theories of leadership cited in contemporary sport psychology research have yet to propose a valid model of the process of inspirational leadership.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Grounded Theory Methodology**

Consistent with Corbin and Strauss<sup>19</sup> variant of grounded theory, this study was underpinned by a pragmatic philosophical perspective. Pragmatists assume that knowledge is developed and meaningful through our actions and interactions and is shaped by the social environment<sup>20</sup> and developed with other people in this environment.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the knowledge developed in this research is a product of the participants' and researchers' beliefs and experiences.

### **2.2 Sampling and Participants**

Initially, purposeful sampling was used to recruit information-rich participants. Athletes who had experience of being inspired by a coach were sampled. As data collection progressed, theoretical sampling was used to further explore concepts identified within the initial data

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collection and analysis.<sup>19</sup> Phases of theoretical sampling included interviewing: (a) coaches (at grass roots, county and regional level) to identify athlete characteristics which impact upon the potential for athletes to be inspired; (b) high-level coaches (eg, coaches who had experience of coaching at national and international level) to explore how group factors influence trust in the coach; and (c) participants who had experiences of a coach who did not inspire them (ie, negative cases) to further challenge and refine the theory. In addition to the specific negative cases that were sought, participants who detailed inspirational cases compared these experiences with coaches who had not inspired them.

Thirty-seven participants (22 athletes and 15 coaches) took part in this study (see Table 1 for details). Participants were British (n = 34), Irish (n = 1), Australian (n = 1), and German (n = 1) and competed or coached in a range of sports (eg, Netball, Football, Rugby Union, Cycling, Goalball, Swimming, Badminton). The competitive levels of participants ranged from recreational (eg, local clubs) to international level (eg, competing or coaching at the Olympics). In addition, the coaches had a range of qualifications with the lowest being the United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC) level 2 or equivalent (eg, Rugby Football Union level 2) and the highest being UKCC level 4 or equivalent (eg, UEFA A).

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

### **2.3 Data collection**

Following institutional ethical approval, athletes fulfilling the initial sampling criteria were approached, via email or face-to-face, to take part in the study. In order to participate in the initial phase of data collection, participants had to be able to identify and recall a coach who they perceived had inspired them during their sporting career. Consistent with grounded theory methodology<sup>19</sup> negative cases (eg, participants who perceived they had not been



inspired by a coach) were used to gain a deeper understanding of inspirational coach-  
leadership (ie, to understand what was lacking from their experiences). Prior to interviews  
and focus groups, participants were provided with a verbal explanation of the study, informed  
about the voluntary nature of their participation, and also reminded that all information  
shared would be confidential. All participants provided written informed consent. We  
conducted 28 individual interviews (18 athletes and 10 coaches) ranging between 34 and 97  
minutes ( $M = 61.84$ ,  $SD = 16.27$ ).

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the process of inspirational coach-  
leadership in sport, as they capture rich and in-depth data.<sup>19</sup> An interview guide was created  
to address the aims of the study, which covered: (a) what coaches did to inspire athletes (eg,  
“Can you tell me about any instances where you have been inspired by your coach during  
your sporting career?”); (b) when (ie, the situation) the athletes were inspired (eg, “What  
happened before you were inspired?”); and (c) why they found that moment inspiring (eg,  
“What is it about the [coach] that made you perceive this moment as inspirational?”). Probe  
questions were used to develop a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences (eg,  
“What was the situation?”). Throughout data collection, the interview guide was consistently  
revised to explore emerging concepts and categories.<sup>19</sup> For instance, when interviewing  
experienced athletes, questions were added which focussed on their experiences of  
inspirational coach-leadership later in their career (eg, “Are there any differences between the  
ways you were inspired when you were less experienced to later in your career?”). Also,  
during the later phases of data collection, the emerging theory was shown to participants to  
evaluate its applicability to their experiences. Finally, two focus groups were conducted with  
a total of 9 participants (4 athletes, 5 coaches). The purpose of these focus groups was to

examine the emerging grounded theory, as well as to provide additional data. Consistent with previous research,<sup>22</sup> focus groups were used to gain insights into whether ‘experts’ (ie, those with experience of inspirational coach-leadership) thought the emerging theory was applicable to their experiences.<sup>19</sup>

## **2.4 Data analysis**

Data analysis followed an iterative process whereby analysis followed each interview.<sup>19</sup> As many individual interviews as possible (n = 24) were transcribed and coded during the data collection phase. Where this was not possible, the lead researcher reflected upon the interviews and listened to the interviews, writing memos to record his perceptions of concepts reported by participants. These memos then informed refinement of the interview guide for subsequent interviews.

Transcription produced 431 pages of single-spaced data, which were analysed using open coding, axial coding, and theoretical integration.<sup>19</sup> Initially, during open coding, line-by-line analysis of the transcript was conducted to identify concepts, their properties, and dimensions related to inspirational coach-leadership. Open coding was used to fracture the data into the smallest units (ie, concepts), which were given a code (eg, ‘showing care for the athletes’). Throughout this phase concepts were compared with one another to establish similarities and differences. Once key concepts started to be identified, axial coding was used to describe and establish relationships between concepts.<sup>19</sup> Through axial coding, concepts identified during open coding were grouped into categories to specify a more holistic explanation of the inspirational coach-leadership processes. For example, descriptive codes relating to coaches’ ability to demonstrate competence and coaches’ ability to create a connection with their athlete(s) were grouped under the category trust and respect.

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The final stage of analysis was theoretical integration.<sup>19</sup> Theoretical integration was used to identify the core category, establish links between categories and the core category, and add density to categories. For instance, the concept of ‘establishing mutual trust and respect’ was identified as important to the coach’s ability to inspire athletes and was integrated into the developing theory. During this stage, the emerging theory was presented to participants who were asked to comment on the extent to which the theory represented their experiences. This feedback enabled further refinement of the theoretical framework by ensuring that findings were grounded in the data and reflected participants’ experiences.<sup>19</sup>

#### **2.4.1.1 Delayed literature review.**

An initial review of inspiration and leadership literature (ie, transformational leadership) was conducted to inform the rationale for this study. However, this served to ensure that the lead researcher was thinking theoretically from the start of a grounded theory and, thus, demonstrated theoretical sensitivity.<sup>23</sup> Importantly, however, concepts identified during analysis were not compared with existing literature until the latter stages of data analysis/collection. At this point, a delayed literature review<sup>19</sup> was undertaken to contrast, compare, and integrate findings with relevant theories and constructs, to reduce conceptual overlap and confusion.

#### **2.5 Methodological rigour.**

As well as the methods described previously (ie, the use of focus groups, theoretical sampling, and the iterative process), further analytical tools were used to enhance the study. First, the data were subjected to constant comparison whereby codes were compared with each other for similarities and differences.<sup>19,23</sup> Fifty-three memos were written (ranging from half a page and two pages long) during data collection/analysis to encourage reflexivity,

clarification, category saturation, and concept development.<sup>19</sup> Memos covered a range of topics including the impact of perceived coach care, the complexity of influencing a group, and how athlete experience effects the ways in which they are inspired. Diagramming was used to visually represent the data with a focus on integrating concepts, checking whether relationships between concepts and categories were logical, and to assist the lead researcher in viewing the data at an abstract level.<sup>19</sup>

Two further methods were used to enhance the rigour of this study. Firstly, a reflexive journal was written throughout the study, which allowed the researcher to record any preconceived ideas or biases in relation to the data. Further, throughout the process two of the research team acted as “critical friends” and a theoretical sounding board by challenging the lead researcher on his interpretations of the data.<sup>24</sup> This process took place several times during both formalised presentations of data, more informal discussions, and via comments on the memos. Finally, the substantive grounded theory can be evaluated using the criteria of fit, relevance, work, and modifiability.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Results

The resulting substantive grounded theory of the process of inspirational coach-leadership in sport is presented in Figure 1. Based upon the experiences of participants interviewed in this study, inspirational coach-leadership changes athletes’ perceptions of their capabilities (in both the short- and/or long-term). The grounded theory is constructed around the core category of ‘athlete inspired through changed awareness of their capabilities’. The core category is underpinned by three other categories: establishing mutual trust and respect with the athlete/team; conditions under which inspiration has the potential to occur; and coach acts to change athlete(s) awareness of their capabilities. In addition, factors that impact the

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process of inspirational coach-leadership are also discussed. The following sections present an overview of the core category, the underpinning categories and the links between them. In the quotes presented, acronyms are used to preserve participants' anonymity (eg, Athlete 1 = A1; Coach 3 = C3).

### **3.1 Core category: Athlete(s) inspired through changed awareness of their capabilities.**

Coaches were proposed to inspire athletes by changing perceptions of their capabilities. For example, one athlete discussed how being inspired by their coach altered their long-term goals:

I thought my potential was a lot higher [after my coach inspired me]. My goal always then was just to compete for GB one time, but once that was achieved I had to set myself a new goal. So, rather than just compete for them, compete and do well. I set more challenging goals in general (A8).

Athletes discussed how the change in their perception of their capabilities could also be short-term in nature. For instance, one athlete discussed how a coach's half-time team-talk inspired his team to perceive that they could turn the game around in the short-term (ie, second half), stating that the coach "just made us all think that 'yeah, we can beat these guys. Yeah, they are better than us, but what is to say we can't go and score two and not concede one.' So, he gave us the belief to go and do it" (A4).

### **3.2 Category 1: Establishment of mutual trust and respect with athlete(s).**

Trust was proposed to be the foundation of coaches' ability to inspire. That is, without trust, participants suggested that it would be very unlikely for athletes to be inspired by their coaches. This was illustrated by one athlete who said:

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298 That's [trust and respect] kind of like the core isn't it, it does boil down to . . . having  
299 that trust and having that respect between the coach and the athletes, because if you  
300 don't have that then you're not going to feel inspired, are you, by them (A16).

301 Trust was proposed to facilitate belief and buy-in in the coach's methods as well as  
302 enhance communication between coaches and athletes. For instance, one athlete said trust  
303 made them, "more likely to listen to [the coach] . . . you are more likely to tell them like if  
304 you have a specific goal you want to aim for . . . you are more likely to speak to them if you  
305 trust them" (A10).

306 The establishment of mutual trust and respect was based around: athletes' perception of  
307 coach competence; the level of personal connection between coaches and athlete(s); and the  
308 extent to which coaches were perceived to demonstrate trust in athletes.

309 **Coach Competence.** Coach competence was suggested to be an important factor in  
310 athletes trusting, and thus being open to being inspired by, the coach. Such trust informed  
311 athletes' expectations of the coach and lead athletes to be more open-minded. Athletes'  
312 perception of coach competence was informed by coach reputation. As one athlete said:

313 I had a coach two years ago who . . . was one of the best coaches I've ever had . . . and  
314 he'd coached a swimmer to 3 Olympic gold-medals . . . and that actually greatly  
315 influenced my decision to come to University, because . . . I'd be able to be coached by  
316 . . . this legend . . . So, yeah that had a massive influence on feeling inspired . . .  
317 because you feel as if "ah, if they did it under that coach then why can't I?" (A16).

318 Coach-attributed improvements also resulted in inspiration. For example, one athlete asserted  
319 that coach-driven improvement "leaves you open to being inspired . . . For example, if they . .

320 . change things and . . . you see your times improving. I suppose you can see it is actually  
321 having an effect” (A8).

322 The content and tone of communication was also proposed to impact on athlete  
323 perceptions of coaches’ competence and inspirational capability. Inspirational coaches were  
324 perceived as passionate and outgoing. Indeed, when discussing factors that influence  
325 coaches’ ability to inspire them, said they needed to be “someone with a bit of what I would  
326 say is charisma” (A15). Coaches’ charisma and personality was proposed to impact on  
327 coaches’ ability to inspire by increasing the potential that an athlete would listen to them.  
328 This was illustrated by one athlete who said that if a coach “turns up with a personality of a  
329 wet dish rag, then you don’t particularly want to listen to them . . . I need someone bubbly,  
330 somebody than can get through to me and be energetic about it” (A3).

331 **Creating a personal connection with athlete(s).** Coach-athlete connection appeared  
332 pivotal to perceptions of a coach’s inspirational capabilities. Athletes and coaches agreed that  
333 personal connection was at least as important as coaching competence. This was highlighted  
334 by one athlete who said:

335 I think football knowledge is not as influential as someone who can talk to people and  
336 understand people . . . respect every member of the team and make you feel valued.  
337 Umm, I think it’s personal qualities . . . which are more influential than any football  
338 specific [knowledge], no matter what level they play there football . . . so it’s not  
339 necessarily where they’ve played, it’s more about their ethos and the way they deal and  
340 communicate with people, which is more inspiring to me (A15).

341 To connect with athletes, coaches were proposed to demonstrate interest in athletes both in  
342 (eg, providing personalised performance-related support) and outside of sport (eg, providing

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343 social support, protecting athletes in public). For example, one athlete described how her  
344 coach demonstrated care by doing “simple things, like I had to take my car to the garage for a  
345 MOT, and he followed me there and took me home, because obviously I couldn’t get home”  
346 (A16). To connect with, and inspire, athletes it appeared important for coaches to be  
347 perceived as authentic and altruistic. This perception was fuelled by honest communication.  
348 With regards to selection, one athlete said:

349       Even if it is not what a player wants to hear, I think that honesty is more beneficial . . .  
350       for instance, I’ve been dropped or something like that and they [the coach] tell me  
351       exactly why . . . So, actually, players will respect coaches more if they give them  
352       feedback. And also . . . I learned with things like selection it is that it is not personal it  
353       is just a matter of opinions . . . but players will take it more personally if there is no  
354       communication (A11).

355       The extent to which the coach represented, and embedded group values was also  
356       proposed to impact upon a coach’s ability to connect with, and inspire, athletes. For instance,  
357       one athlete outlined the importance of his coach embedding team values stating, “Another big  
358       thing for him was that, I suppose it was inspirational, he made sure that players bought in to  
359       what the club was about” (A11). In accord with this, one coach discussed the importance of  
360       translating club values to his team in order to enhance connection:

361       So, when [the old coach] left I thought it was my duty to, yes win, but look after the  
362       soul of the club to what it means . . . I also think . . . I get the club; I get what it stands  
363       for and what it believes in, what its point of difference is. I think I have been very good  
364       at translating that (C3).



**Coach demonstrating trust in their athlete(s).** Athletes and coaches agreed that trust needed to be reciprocated in order for athletes to be inspired by the coach. For example, a Paralympic athlete discussed how his coach inspire him through demonstrating trust in him:

He [the coach] was all about giving visually impaired people that independence and doing things for themselves and . . . I've passed it on to others. So, I know he has inspired me because things he has done, I am passing on to others (A9).

Coaches providing athletes with choice and autonomy, and then acting on athlete feedback, was proposed to demonstrate trust in athletes. For example, one athlete perceived her coach to trust her because, "he used to ask us things like if we enjoyed the session, what we'd prefer to do, what we liked doing" (A5).

Providing leadership responsibility was posited to demonstrate trust in athletes, but also served to reinforce coach influence over, and thus ability to inspire, athletes. For instance, one coach described the importance of having a "core group" of players onside:

You do need . . . some really senior, influential core people who live and drive by the values of the organisation . . . you are not going to get 12 or 13, but you have to get the majority . . . of the influential ones to be driving and then that allows you to absorb your maverick (C3).

### **3.3 Category 2: Conditions under which inspiration has the potential to occur.**

When recalling instances of being inspired, athletes discussed the situation prior to being inspired by their coach. Overall, athletes seemed to lack knowledge relating to their capabilities and or their future potential prior to being inspired

**Athlete uncertain regarding potential or ways to improve.** Athletes discussed how they were inspired by coaches when they lacked direction (eg, uncertain of their next goal,

388 transitioning to a new context). This was illustrated by one ex-international coach who  
389 discussed how his athletes were often oblivious to their potential:

390 . . . uncertainty regarding potential is again what I said to you that “I want to convince  
391 you, you can do what you think you are unable to do”, right . . . it’s rather lack of  
392 knowledge . . . you just don’t know what you are capable of (C9).

393 Further, athletes were inspired in scenarios where they lacked knowledge regarding  
394 how to improve their own performance. This was illustrated by one athlete who said:

395 So, umm, I kick a lot and especially like when I wasn’t the most effective swimmer  
396 like last year, I kicked more and he [the coach] went behind me for one length and  
397 then we finished, and I was quite out of breath. . . I didn’t really understand that we  
398 weren’t meant to be going that hard, and . . . basically he was telling me to pull more  
399 and to kick less and relax when I swim (A2).

400 In addition, experienced athletes discussed how a lack of awareness of what they  
401 could achieve following a high-level of personal achievement (eg, having had a successful  
402 international career) could precede inspiration. This was highlighted by one international  
403 athlete who discussed how towards the end of his career he was uncertain of what his next  
404 goal could be:

405 For me personally when I gave up the captaincy and stopped playing for England I  
406 struggled . . . because I didn’t know what the kind of next goal was . . . I think that is  
407 very dangerous for a coach because they can think they can stop inspiring those older  
408 guys because they feel that they know everything and they feel that they should know  
409 everything themselves (A11).

**Athlete lacks knowledge or belief regarding ability to overcome challenging circumstances.** Athletes were inspired in situations where they lacked belief or experience (eg, following poor performance, in novel situations). For instance, prior to being inspired, one athlete recalled how her team was feeling pressure as they did not have experience of competing at that level recalling, “I think, the main issue with that is we hadn’t had the previous experience of medal racing, so whatever [the coach] said or did, I think there was going to be an element of we didn’t know how to deal with the pressure” (A1).

Athletes reported lacking belief in their ability prior to being inspired by their coach. This was illustrated by one athlete when describing how she felt prior to being inspired stating, “I got into this other club. Umm, and I didn’t know that I was [good enough] . . . so when I got there, I didn’t think that I was actually worthy of being there” (A21). Inspiration was needed when athletes were at extreme lows, as illustrated by one coach who described how his athlete was in a desperate state prior to being inspired:

A little bit earlier in the year I had one athlete that was really struggling with burnout and she is one of the girls that, using this next gen programme, I’m working with now. She had about 4 to 6 weeks sort of in March and April this year where she was just close to saying “that’s it, I’ve had enough. I’m not going to do this anymore” (C2).

### **3.4 Category 3: Coach acts to change athlete’s awareness of their capabilities.**

To inspire athletes, coaches need to change athletes’ perceptions of their capabilities. Coaches are proposed to inspire athletes by demonstrating and instilling belief in their ability; and outlining what and how an athlete can achieve in the future.

432       **Demonstrating and instilling belief.** Athletes discussed being inspired when they

433 perceived that their coaches demonstrated belief in them. This was illustrated by one athlete  
434 who discussed:

435       He's [the coach] always said to me "I'm watching your results. I'm watching what  
436 you're doing. Why are you going to Uni? Why are you not going full-time sailing?  
437 Why are you still at college? I want you to be full-time sailing." And I think it was  
438 somebody else having that full belief in me that I found inspirational . . . He always just  
439 said "this is what you should be doing. You can get to the Olympics. Why are you not  
440 going for it?" (A1).

441 Coaches agreed that athletes were inspired by demonstrations of belief (eg, providing  
442 encouragement and reassurance). For instance, one coach discussed how she perceived she  
443 inspired an athlete struggling for confidence:

444       When I met her [the athlete] she was English Universities, [University] student, I only  
445 had her for one year . . . and she was trying to get into England . . . but at the time her  
446 face wasn't fitting. . . and I just said to her "look, as far as I'm concerned I've seen a  
447 lot of players through here." I said "you are the most athletic, capable player I have  
448 ever seen come through the door. You need to keep knocking until the door is open." .  
449 . . The first time I saw her since she'd made it into England (C6).

450       As well as directly demonstrating belief (eg, outlining athlete potential), coach  
451 behaviour was also proposed to display belief. For example, coaches making sacrifices for  
452 athletes (eg, giving up their own time to provide extra support) was deemed inspiring. For  
453 instance, one athlete recalled how she was inspired by her coach's support:

454 She'll [the coach] always take us to the competitions that allow us to progress . . .  
455 fitness sessions or extra sessions at another club when we haven't got the hall, just to  
456 make it the maximum opportunity to be what we can (A10).

457 Coaches also instilled belief in athletes by having a strengths-based approach to  
458 coaching. For instance, one athlete discussed being inspired when his coach "emphasised my  
459 strengths, and kind of suppress any weaknesses that I might have" (A15). As well as  
460 highlighting strengths, coaches inspired athletes, by playing to these strengths. This was  
461 highlighted by a retired former-professional athlete who described how his coach inspired  
462 them despite being physically inferior to their opponents:

463 Liam [the coach], obviously, masterminded this way of play . . . we had the handling  
464 skills, we had the fitness and the speed and ultimately, we'd wear them down . . . he  
465 gave us confidence in our ability, our handling skills and certainly confidence in our  
466 fitness and physical preparation because you know we were fitter than them and he  
467 built the whole game plan around that, so that was inspirational because it made you  
468 feel good about yourself (A18).

469 As well as something that the coach physically said or did, coaches could indirectly  
470 instil belief in, and inspire, athletes based on their past accomplishments (eg, their  
471 achievements with other athletes). For example, one athlete described:

472 . . . if I know that I could be coached by someone who, umm, has coached an athlete  
473 to five Olympic gold-medals then I would . . . if I was to start being coached by them  
474 then I would think that I could do that . . . yeah, definitely that would kind of motivate  
475 me to think that "why can't I do that if I'm under this certain coach that's coached this  
476 girl to five Olympic gold-medals?" and it builds your confidence, as well. I think

that's . . . a massive thing because when I was being coached by this certain coach I felt as if no one was going to stop me because, umm, he was such a renowned coach and his training was so renowned (A16).

**Showing the way forward.** Athletes were also inspired when coaches provided them with information that would allow them to reach goals or overcome challenges. Athletes proposed that having long-term goals to work towards was inspirational, but for them to be truly inspiring they needed to understand how to reach those goals. For example, one athlete stated, "I think inspiration is seeing the goal that you want, umm, and . . . seeing the goal that you want to get to and being able to highlight the steps that you want to get there" (A12). Alongside understanding the path towards their goals, it was proposed that in order to maintain inspiration athletes needed to understand the link between their current actions (eg, in practice) and their long-term goals. This was highlighted by an international coach who discussed how he continued to inspire athletes on a day-to-day basis:

It's reminding them [athletes] why we do it sometimes, what is at stake. You know, you are doing the first one day game in May and you talk about road to Wembley, "you know, this finishes at [the final]. It's May today but it finishes in August at [the final] . . . So, this game today counts just as much as that one" . . . because if we don't deal with that day in May we are not going to get to that day in August (C3).

As well as being inspired towards long-term goals, athletes were also inspired when coaches were able to provide them with information that would allow them to overcome short-term obstacles. For example, one athlete described how the coach provided specific instructions to inspire her and her teammate:

He didn't speak to us about racing before the race and we'd never had that before, before a race. The coaches would usually say to us the shifts are doing this, the breeze is at this angle, this is where the course is, constantly thinking about it. What I think he was doing is he knew we already knew that. We had already been racing there for a week. . . Then when we set off to do the race he gave us three bullet points, like "this is what you're going to do, that is what is going to happen, and here you go" . . . he would tell us "start under this group because you know they are going to be quick" so we'd do that and execute that, and we knew we put ourselves in a good position to start the whole race. So, I think that was pretty inspiring because he took our mind off and then said "focus on that, that's all you have to do. Now go and do it" (A1).

Experienced athletes reported being less likely to be inspired by coaches outlining a long-term goal. In this instance, providing athletes with responsibility was proposed to inspire them. For instance, one athlete discussed, following deselection from international level, he was inspired when his coach presented him the opportunity to mentor junior players:

[The coach said] "We've got a young player here, a really good player; we need you to work with him." You know actually take the focus off the big goal and get some energy in here, yes to help the other player but to give you another goal (A11).

### **3.5 Factors that impact on the process of inspirational leadership.**

Athletes and coaches proposed that a range of factors (related to the coach, athlete, and context) impact upon the process of inspirational coach-leadership. These factors were seen to impact upon the other categories identified within the grounded theory and, consequently, the potential for athletes to be inspired by coaches. The experience level of coaches had an impact on the process of inspirational coach-leadership. Coach experience was proposed to

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522 impact on coaches' decision making, reflective practice, self-awareness, and ability to  
523 establish trust and respect with athletes. Coaches having a positive outlook (eg, in their  
524 general demeanour, their communication with and thoughts about their athletes) was  
525 proposed to impact upon athletes' perceptions of, and potential to be inspired by, the coach.  
526 This was illustrated by one athlete who said that their coach was "always positive about the  
527 team, even if we were losing every week, he'd still be like next week we will win. If he did  
528 have any negative thoughts we wouldn't have known about it" (A7).

529 Athletes' experience, level of self-awareness, and desire to learn and improve were  
530 seen to impact the extent to which they were open to being inspired. For instance, athletes'  
531 previous sporting experiences were proposed to impact upon the way they perceive and  
532 interact with their coach. The general consensus was that less experienced athletes were more  
533 open to being inspired, whereas experienced athletes were less open (because of higher self-  
534 awareness) and more likely to challenge the coach. Indeed, one athlete discussed:

535 I think the biggest thing when you are older in your career, you kind of know more. I  
536 would argue to a certain extent, someone can't keep selling you a dream. So, it's like  
537 when you are 19, 20, 21, 22 . . . you are kind of a little bit wet behind the ears and  
538 you'll believe anything and think I can achieve that. Whereas, I think sometimes when  
539 you get later on in your career it is difficult to kind of keep selling those dreams  
540 because in a bad way you've got those experiences and had those knocks that make you  
541 think "actually it doesn't kind of work out like this" (A11).

542 A commonality among athletes was that they appeared to have motivation to develop. For  
543 example, one coach described athletes who he perceived to have inspired as being,  
544 "motivated, they are committed, they do have . . . desire and have, umm, aspirations" (C5).

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In addition, the context was proposed to impact on the process of inspirational leadership. Participants suggested that the performance-level at which they were operating and contact time with the coach impacts upon the potential for athletes to be inspired. For example, when asked about what impacts on her potential to inspire athletes, one coach responded, “whether you’ve got enough time with them; that is probably the biggest thing [in terms of inspiration]” (C6). Athletes suggested that contact time impacted their perception of their coach’s dedication to their development. For instance, one athlete said, “I think time, as well, I think that’s crucial. I think if they dedicate a lot of time to you . . . I think that would inspire me more because they are putting so much time into me” (A14).

### **3.6 A substantive grounded theory of the process of inspirational coach-leadership in sport.**

The proposed grounded theory (see figure 1) suggests that athletes are inspired when coaches are able to change their awareness of their short- or long-term capabilities (see core category). In order to change athletes’ awareness, and thus inspire them, coaches need to establish trust and respect with their athletes (see category 1) by demonstrating competence (eg, showing they have the ability to have a positive impact on athletes), creating a connection with their athletes on a personal level (eg, showing interest in their athletes’ welfare), and showing trust in their athletes (eg, empowering athletes to take responsibility). Having established a level of mutual trust and respect, coaches are then able to inspire athletes when the athlete is in a situation where inspiration has the potential to occur (see category 2). The theory suggests that these situations are characterised by athlete vulnerability, whereby athletes are unsure or lacking in awareness regarding (a) their short- or long-term potential or (b) how they can overcome challenges or reach their goals. In order

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to change awareness (see category 3), coaches need to act in ways that demonstrate belief in athletes (eg, outlining an athlete's long-term potential) and/or provide them with information or resources that enables them to overcome challenges or reach their goals (eg, provide clear solutions to problems). Also, the theory proposes that factors relating to the context, athlete, and coach interact to impact upon: (1) the establishment of mutual trust and respect between coaches and their athletes; (2) the conditions under which inspiration has the potential to occur; and (3) the way a coach acts to change athlete(s) awareness of their capabilities.

The theory is also cyclical in that it proposes that the changed awareness associated with becoming inspired impacts on the other categories within the process. More specifically, being inspired has the potential to: (1) enhance the level of trust between coaches and athletes (eg, an athlete's perception of their coach's competence is higher), (2) impact upon the conditions under which inspiration may occur (eg, athletes are more aware of what they can achieve, thus may not lack knowledge of their capabilities anymore), and thus make it less likely for athletes to be inspired by coaches demonstrating belief in their ability; and (3) change the factors that impact upon the process of inspirational coach-leadership (eg, athletes have a changed level of self-awareness).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

#### **4. Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to develop a substantive grounded theory of inspirational coach-leadership. In doing so, this study adds to the limited understanding regarding inspirational leadership by providing the first theory of inspirational leadership derived specifically in the sporting context. The grounded theory suggests that athletes are inspired

when coaches act to change their awareness of what they can achieve (eg, by outlining their long-term potential) in situations characterised by uncertainty (eg, when an athlete is unsure how to overcome challenging performance circumstances) and ignorance (eg, when an athlete is unaware of their potential).

The grounded theory highlights the potential to integrate several existing theories to more fully understand the complex process of leadership. Several elements of other theories appear to be embedded within the proposed grounded theory. For instance, the coach demonstrating interest in athletes is consistent with the individual consideration element of TFL.<sup>8</sup> In relation to trust, the need for the coach to represent group values has consistently been identified as factor that affects the potential for leaders to influence groups within the social identity approach to leadership.<sup>25</sup> Providing choice to athletes relates to the autonomy concept of self-determination theory<sup>26</sup> which is central to the premise of the empowering coaching programme.<sup>27</sup> This theory also has elements from theories yet to be extensively explored within the sporting context. Indeed, the concepts of empowering followers, showing care for followers, and being authentic are elements of follower-orientated models of leadership such as self-sacrificial leadership<sup>28</sup> and servant leadership.<sup>29</sup> Further, that leaders who inspire demonstrate confidence and trust in athletes, appear passionate and show conviction when communicating has parallels with central facets of charismatic leadership.<sup>30</sup>

The current research provides information on leadership behaviours proposed to inspire. These include demonstrations of belief (eg, outlining an athlete's long-term potential, providing encouragement, making sacrifices, focussing on athlete strengths) and showing the way forward (eg, providing tactical information that helps an athlete to reach their goals, providing specific instructions to overcome challenges, providing responsibility, and setting

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new goals). These behaviours resonate with previous leadership theories. For example, outlining an athlete's potential and providing encouragement has links with the inspirational motivation dimension of TFL.<sup>10</sup> In addition, making sacrifices for athletes appears to relate to self-sacrificial leadership.<sup>28</sup>

Although the findings highlight ways in which coaches may inspire, a key proposition of the grounded theory is that efforts to inspire will only be successful if an athlete trusts their coach. By highlighting the importance of trust in the process of inspirational coach-leadership, this study contributes to leadership theory more broadly by identifying antecedents of trust (ie, why athletes trust their coach) and offering suggestions in relation to the role that trust plays in leader effectiveness. Taking these in turn, factors that facilitate trust in a leader identified in the grounded theory are similar to existing conceptualisations of trust. For example, the concepts of 'perception of coach competence' and 'personal connection between coach and athlete(s)' incorporate elements related to ability, benevolence, and integrity (eg, demonstrating care for athletes, representing the values of the group, demonstrating competence).<sup>31</sup> However, the findings of this study add to the literature on trust—which has shown little consideration for the leader trusting their followers<sup>32</sup>—by suggesting that athletes need to feel that trust is reciprocated in order for trust to be formed. Thus, this theory identifies ways coaches demonstrate trust in athletes (ie, providing choice and autonomy, and encouraging responsibility and leadership).

The findings of this study also add to theory regarding the role of trust in leader effectiveness. Generally trust is proposed to mediate between leader behaviours and follower outcomes.<sup>33</sup> This study suggests that the relationship between trust and leadership is more dynamic, with participants in this study indicating that without trust coaches would be unable

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to inspire athletes. This would appear to be in line with the conceptualisation of trust as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor”<sup>34(p712)</sup>. Consequently, the present findings suggest that trust may moderate the impact of leadership on followers. Specifically, leader behaviours and interactions with their athlete over time have the potential to establish trust, which, in turn, leaves an athlete more open to being inspired by their coach.

As well as the importance of developing trust, in line with other theories of leadership (eg, multidimensional model of leadership)<sup>16</sup>, the proposed grounded theory suggests that contextual factors (relating to the athlete, the coach, and performance-level) impact on the process of inspirational coach-leadership. Taking these in turn, athletes who had a desire to improve were deemed to be more open to being inspired. This supports previous research that has shown intrinsic motivation to moderate the extent to which an individual experiences inspiration.<sup>2</sup> In addition, athlete’s experience and level of self-awareness was proposed to influence the extent to which they could be inspired, with experienced athletes proposed to be more difficult to inspire. This may be because their awareness of their actual- or best-self hinders the appreciation of a potential future-self.<sup>35</sup> Specifically, experienced athletes’ knowledge of their limitations may hinder their appreciation of a better future-self because it is inconsistent with the limits of their previous best-self.<sup>35</sup> Coach experience and level of motivation was also posited to impact upon the process of inspiring athletes by impacting upon a coach’s confidence, decision making, and their ability to establish trust and respect. This finding aligns with research into coaching practice which has shown that a coach’s previous experience and motivation can impact upon their behaviour and subsequently

athlete's perceptions of the coach.<sup>36</sup> With regards to performance level, it was proposed that greater levels of contact time allow for increased interaction between the coach and athlete, which enhanced the level of trust between coaches and athletes (eg, suggesting that coaches were dedicating increased time to athletes). Indeed, this supports Shamir's<sup>37</sup> proposition that "it takes time for the majority of leadership inputs to produce the outcomes and the likelihood that the inputs, the outcomes, and relationships between them may change over time" (p. 307). Therefore, the theory suggests that coaches need to consider contextual factors when considering how to inspire athletes.

#### **4.1 Applied implications**

The proposed grounded theory provides several applied suggestions for coaches and practitioners working with coaches. First, this grounded theory suggests situations in which coaches might be able to inspire athletes (eg, following poor performance). Second, the grounded theory highlights how coaches might inspire athletes (eg, by outlining an athlete's long-term potential). In addition, the grounded theory suggests that coaches need to be cognisant of contextual factors that might impact on whether coaches can inspire. For example, the findings suggest that athletes' experience, level of self-awareness, and the performance-level at which they compete, impact upon the process (eg, what an athlete can be inspired by, the level of trust and respect between coaches and athletes). Crucially, it appears that athletes are only inspired if they trust the coach on both a personal and professional level. Thus, coaches and practitioners are encouraged to target the antecedents of trust identified within the grounded theory to enhance a coach's ability to inspire athletes in suitable conditions.

## 4.2 Strengths, limitations and future research directions

Considering the limitations of previous literature outlined in the introduction, this study has several strengths. First, this study provides the first theory of inspirational coach-leadership derived specifically in the sporting context. Second, this study outlines several mechanisms that may explain the inspirational influence of the inspiring behaviours identified. Third, our findings go some way to addressing criticisms of previous leadership theory and research which fail to take into account factors that may impact on leaders' decision making.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, this study outlines not only *what* leaders do to inspire, but also outlines *when* and *why* leaders might engage in behaviours proposed to inspire athletes. Finally, this study has been conducted in a rigorous manner using a range of methods to enhance methodological coherence and rigour (writing memos, and theoretical sampling) which is in line with Weed's suggestions of what is considered quality grounded theory.

While this study provides a framework to guide coaches' attempts to inspire athletes, the application of the proposed theory needs to be considered in light of the study's limitations. For instance, the current study relied on retrospective accounts of participants' experiences. Thus, the current findings may be limited by hindsight biases. However, it is important to consider that inspiration is not something that you can necessarily observe as it happens in the "natural context of everyday life" and is usually "not the result of deliberate effort of one party . . . to inspire another";<sup>1(p506)</sup> indeed, coaches in this study suggested that they did not intentionally aim to inspire. That is not to say that observational methods would not be useful to enhance our understanding of this process, rather that they could compliment other qualitative methods. Thus, future research may use observational methods to enhance our understanding of coaches' (identified as inspirational by athletes) practices that may

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inspire athletes. In addition, exploring experiences of high-profile coaches identified as inspiring may be fruitful. However, as access to such coaches is limited, using available media sources (eg, autobiographies)—as used in previous sport-leadership research (eg, Smith, Arnold, & Thelwell)<sup>39</sup>—may be useful in extending our understanding of inspirational leadership. Such methods work to refine and extend our understanding of this process.

In addition, while this is a useful first step to developing a theory of inspirational leadership in sport, to extend our understanding, it may be beneficial to explore how others in leadership positions (both formal and informal) inspire athletes and peers. Further, this study relied on experiences of participants from western (primarily British) cultures. Thus, exploring experiences of participants from other cultures is important, and could enable researchers to develop a formal theory of inspirational coach-leadership in sport.<sup>18</sup> Further, this study could provide the foundation for research exploring how leaders inspire followers in other contexts (eg, in educational, organisational, and healthcare contexts). Finally, future research could explore the feasibility and efficacy of leadership development programs based upon these findings. To do so, an action-research approach—successfully adopted by researchers who have developed programs based upon the proposals of grounded theory studies (eg, Thrower, Harwood, & Spray)<sup>40</sup>—could be used. Such an approach would also provide the opportunity for the central proposals of the theory to be refined and, thus, further our understanding of the process of inspirational coach-leadership.

## **5. Perspectives**

This study offers a substantive grounded theory of the process of inspirational coach-leadership in sport, and highlights the complex and nuanced process the coach engages with in order to inspire athletes. As well as behaving in a manner to change athletes' awareness,

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when athletes are lacking in knowledge or having a crisis in confidence, the developed theory highlights that athletes' level of trust and respect for the coach has the potential to make or break the potential for a coach to inspire athletes. Thus, in order to have an inspirational influence coaches should engage in practices aimed at establishing trust and respect with their athletes. Moreover, this theory provides coaches and coach developers with recommendations on which to develop their own or others' ability to inspire. Given that this is the first sport-specific theory of the process of inspirational coach-leadership, these results offer an important theoretical foundation for future research and a theoretical framework on which applied practice can be based.

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